



Regional Workgroup
Coahuila-Nuevo León-Tamaulipas-Texas
(Four-State Regional Workgroup)

Meeting of the Amistad Task Force

Date: Tuesday, November 18, 2014
Time: 10:30 a.m. – 1:15 p.m.

Middle Rio Grande Workforce Center
1200 Ferry St.
Eagle Pass, TX 78852

Minutes

Summary of Participants: Thirty persons were present in the meeting room when the meeting began, including officials from several departments of the City of Eagle Pass, Piedras Negras, Del Rio, Acuña, Nava, the State of Coahuila environmental agency, SEMARNAT (via videoconference), an environmental organization in Piedras Negras, the Kickapoo tribe, Middle Rio Grande Development Council, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, BECC and EPA Region 6 office in El Paso.

Victor Wong thanked the Middle Rio Grande Workforce Center for hosting the event and allowing the use of their VTC equipment for today's meeting and the City of Eagle Pass for assisting with the snacks and refreshments for the event.

Gustavo Pantoja of EPA/BECC issued welcoming remarks on behalf of Tamaulipas SEMARNAT Delegate Jesus Gonzalez who is the Mexican federal Co-chair.

Dr. Carlos Rincon from the EPA Region 6 office in El Paso issued welcoming remarks on behalf of Sam Coleman who is the U.S. Co-chair and discussed the Two-Year Action Plan.

Rincon provided an overview of the National Coordinators meeting held on November 4 in Mexico City. He encouraged synergies between the state, local and private sector to bring more resources to develop sustainable projects.

He discussed a workshop held in Tijuana about Mexican state's vehicle emission programs.

EPA, BECC and TCEQ are finalizing updates to the current Two-Year Action Plan and will begin working on developing a new version.

Biol. Eglantina Canales from the Secretariat of the Environment in Coahuila thanked ecology staff from Piedras Negras, Acuña and Nava for attending the meeting. Canales stressed the importance of including more local projects into the Action Plan because local officials are the ones experiencing environmental challenges related to scrap tires and used electronics in their communities.

She encouraged more networking and synergies between academic institutions and municipalities to address environmental challenges at the local level. She cited examples of successful working relationships between universities in Piedras Negras and Acuña with local municipal officials. The involvement of youth organizations in environmental activities is the key to a sustainable future.

Mayor Ramsey Cantu of Eagle Pass stressed the importance of continuing binational cooperation between agencies to address environmental issues in the border and improve quality of life for residents through environmental awareness programs. Cantu thanked Del Rio staff for attending the meeting and recognized Hector Chavez for his efforts in bringing attention to environmental issues in the community to state and federal officials.

Teresa Molina from Piedras Negras ecology staff issued welcoming remarks on behalf of Mayor Puron and expressed interest in organizing a meeting in Piedras Negras in the future. Officials from Nava, Acuña and Del Rio discussed their expectations for the meeting.

Victor Wong provided an overview of the Border 2020 program and briefly discussed the meeting objectives.

Rosa Elvira Martinez from the Border Area Health Education Center discussed a promotora-led training on lead and pesticides for children that the center is conducting and was funded by the EPA's Border 2020 Program. It is an 18-month project. There are currently on the sixth month of the project.

The Department of State Health Services (DSHS) designated two zip codes in Eagle Pass as targeted codes requiring lead testing for children at various points. There have been studies among pregnant women for pesticides that show exposure may adversely affect mental and motor development during childbirth and infancy.

A study of the School of Medicine at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio found that air samples from homes of expectant Hispanic mothers along the border contained multiple kinds of pesticides, because of their use of pest control methods and given the amount of time they spent indoors. Childhood lead exposure is endemic in areas of substandard housing and extreme poverty, which is prevalent in colonias in Maverick County.

Martinez mentioned that about 3.7% of children reported having asthma in Maverick County, according to a study conducted in 2011.

Some of the project partners are the University of Texas School of Public Health, Department of State Health Services, the Mexican Consulate Ventanillas de Salud program and the Eagle Pass Independent School District.

The project will be targeting colonias in Eagle Pass. Its purpose is to use a community health model to reach out to parents, school teachers and health care providers with the aim of improving the environment in and around the home, school and health care facilities. Within the home environment, parents will be receiving education about inappropriate dumping in their areas of residence. Promotoras will be providing education and capacity building and organizing cleanup campaigns during the project period within the targeted community.

The project incorporates a train-to-trainer approach to develop educational modules and train community health workers to do outreach in homes. More than five modules were developed and six health workers trained to conduct field visits. We will be doing a pre-assessment of the school facilities and educating teachers, administrative staff and children.

A post-assessment will be conducted after three months to measure improvements. Promotoras will be doing a pre-assessment in homes and educating the parents on lead, pesticides, asthma, and mercury and a post-assessment will be conducted to determine if there were improvements. Promotoras will work with residents to organize two cleanup campaigns with the goal of trying to form a green colonia group with members of the Tri National Health Council.

They have completed the modules and evaluation materials and recruited the promotoras. They will be conducting field visits shortly.

Expected Outcomes

1. Increase knowledge of community health workers
2. Reduce environmental health risks at home
3. Improve environmental quality of schools and head start centers
4. Increase to 10% the number of children ages 3 to 5 for lead testing
5. Assist the green colonia group in sustaining cleaning campaigns

Field workers will be doing outreach in two schools and one head center in Eagle Pass.

Dr. Carlos Rincon mentioned that the Border Health Commission (BHC) is in the process of developing a strategic plan for implementation of the Healthy Border 2020 Program and signed a Collaborative Agreement with EPA. It will allow EPA and BHC to work together on identifying priority projects related to environmental health through the health council (COBINAS) along the border, participate in health fairs and workshops to enhance environmental health awareness focused on lead and pesticides, and identify and promote best practices for the storage and handling of pesticides.

Dr. Felipe Uribe from Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) presented his analysis on an environmental health model in the Texas/Mexico border that COLEF is developing and it's funded by the EPA's Border 2020 program. The project partners are COLEF and the Texas A&M Health Science Center.

There have been studies on lead levels in children in Torreón, but there have not been any recent studies in the border.

The objectives of the project are to develop a Memorandum of Understanding with the border cities to establish an information model on the environment and health impacts, create an environmental and health workgroup with local, state and federal agencies, and develop an information exchange system to build a binational program to monitor significant changes in the environment and their impact on the population.

COLEF conducted interviews with agencies to obtain data that can be used as health indicators to measure pollutants in the environment and analyze mortality rates.

COLEF obtained Coahuila emissions inventory data for 17 municipalities. The data shows that Nava releases about 40% of emissions in the state due to the two thermoelectric plants in their

area, specifically nitrogen oxide and particulate matter. The cities of Ocampo and Muzquiz release primarily volatile organic compounds (VOC) and Piedras Negras leads the state in pollution from mobile sources because of the number of motor vehicles in the city. Ciudad Acuña leads the state in PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5} emissions.

Data on health indicators was obtained from Mexico's national health information system and national epidemiological surveillance system. These systems contain information on birth, mortality rates and infectious diseases.

Conclusions

1. There is not enough data on air pollutants because of the lack of equipment to measure air particles in real time and over time periods. This makes it difficult to identify specific particles and their health impact on the population.
2. There are no air monitors in border cities.
3. The data from the national health information and epidemiological surveillance systems is not accurate because it doesn't show statistics from local and state health institutions.

Eglantina Canales proposed correlating the data with the results from the promotora-led training on lead and pesticides that the Border Area Health Education Center is conducting so that it is compatible and stressed the importance of exploring more information sources by surveying local health clinics and using students from academic institutions for research purposes.

Asthma and other cardio-respiratory illnesses are caused by air pollution, but there are still illnesses that don't have enough data to determine their main source. We need to investigate if some of these illnesses are due to environmental or nutrition factors. The State of Coahuila environmental agency has a census of economic activities and annual operation reports that they can provide to COLEF for this project.

Jesus Gonzalez de la Garza mentioned that the two thermoelectric plants in Nava burn about 34,000 tons of carbon annually and contribute as much as 10.5% of electricity to Mexico's electrical grid. Both plants have scrubbers and equipment to capture ash from their stacks and about 96 to 97% of pollutants.

Dr. Carlos Rincon mentioned that the COESPRIS (Mexican state health entities) offices can be a good source of information to obtain specific data on health indicators from local health agencies.

Gustavo Pantoja discussed a visit by Mexican officials to solid waste management facilities in Austin.

Officials visited the TCEQ offices to learn about waste regulations and the enforcement process in the state and toured the Austin Resource Recovery, Texas Disposal Systems and Balcones Resources plants.

Austin Resource Recovery has about 200 units that run on compressed natural gas; they have about 160 workers, serve about 185,000 households and process 40,000 tons of yard waste.

They are in the process of initiating a food collection program with 14,000 households to generate compost out of the organic material. The facility collects about 125,000 tons of

recyclable material and dispose of about 700 tons of hazardous waste annually. 70% of hazardous waste is primarily paint waste; it is processed and free to the public.

The Balcones Resources facility has an automated plant and stores recyclable material. The material is processed and sold to Mexico. More than 15,000 tons of material is processed monthly. At the end of the process, 5% of commercial waste and 14% of domestic waste is disposed at the landfill.

Hector Chavez asked Pantoja about Austin's scrap tire program. Pantoja mentioned that the tires are picked up by a transporter and sent to a disposal facility and shipped to a facility to be processed.

Chavez stressed the need to pass legislation that would require the state to charge a scrap tire fee.

Oscar Flores from the Secretariat of the Environment in Coahuila presented information on the state's role in the exploration of shale gas.

PEMEX identified the Sabinas Burro Picacho Basin as a potential area for gas exploration in Coahuila. It has shale formations at depths from 8,250 to 13,200 ft. A Request for Bids was opened for the private sector to drill gas wells in the area.

Coahuila officials are part of a gas mining group that is composed of businesses, academic institutions and local governments. The role of the group is to promote the exploration of hydrocarbon reserves to benefit society in a sustainable way. The group has six committees that oversee the social, economic and environmental aspects of the gas exploration process.

17 cities have been identified as potential areas for gas drilling activities. The State of Coahuila has already contacted the ecology directors in these communities to keep them abreast of the potential impacts of this process and to be prepared for any possible contingencies at the local level. The agency is drafting a document on environmental regulations related to gas drilling that will be reviewed with municipalities and lay the groundwork for local officials to respond to any areas within their jurisdiction.

The Coahuila environmental agency is working with SEMARNAT and PROFEPA offices in the state to review gas drilling regulations and it recently organized the state's first energy forum to discuss the regulatory framework for gas/oil activities and bring together private investment for the gas drilling process. With regards to the educational component, universities are opening gas degree programs to prepare the youth for careers in the shale gas industry.

SEMARNAT, PROFEPA and the Coahuila environmental agency will regulate different environmental aspects of the gas exploration process. SEMARNAT will oversee the proper disposal of hazardous waste generated by the drilling process and the Coahuila environmental agency will regulate the disposal of waste that is not used for drilling, as well as monitor air emissions from these facilities. Other state agencies will oversee the infrastructure process such as road and urban development.

The regional offices in Monclova and Piedras Negras were provided with equipment and training to inspect gas facilities within their areas.

Eglantina Canales mentioned that the state is in the process of installing an air monitoring station to measure air emissions from the thermoelectric plants near Nava. The Coahuila environmental agency will work with Texas on using the air monitoring stations in Eagle Pass and Del Rio as data models for air stations that will be installed in Acuña and Piedras Negras.

There are plans to build treatment facilities for the fluids that are used for the gas extraction process and to meet the demand of the growing population as a result of the gas boom.

Victor Ibarra from Green Tec Osos discussed his group's activities. The group is composed of students from the Piedras Negras Technological Institute. They conducted workshops on energy conservation in Piedras Negras and Acuña and participated in environmental education and shale gas shale forums.

The group was part of a student team that conducted water sampling activities along the Rio Grande during the Rio Research Roundup held in October. They sampled Ph levels, nitrate, dissolved oxygen and turbidity.

Ibarra proposed three projects for the Border 2020 program:

1. A sustainable water management project for drip irrigation
 2. A system of capture for water leaks from air conditioning units that can be used for irrigation
 3. A wastewater treatment facility to recycle irrigated water.
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Hector Chavez from the City of Eagle Pass provided an overview of the BECC Green Infrastructure Forum held in September in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua.

Stormwater runoff is a major cause of water pollution in urban areas. It carries trash and heavy metals and other pollutants from urban landscape degrading the quality of water bodies. About 60% of regulated urbanized areas in the United States discharge to impaired waters. This leads to erosion, steeper banks and flooding.

Green infrastructure uses vegetation and natural processes to manage water and create healthier urban environments. It refers to stormwater management systems that mimic nature by soaking out distorted water. An increasing number of communities are integrating green infrastructure practices.

Cities have developed infrastructure to capture water runoff from roof buildings and use it to irrigate plants. Chavez mentioned that the Piedras Negras Technological Institute could benefit from this type of infrastructure to beautify their green areas.

The City of Eagle Pass is in the process of developing more infrastructure to capture stormwater runoff for irrigation purposes and avoid flooding issues. There are plans to develop community gardens and build rain barrels to capture rainwater.

Comments

Victor Ibarra proposed creating an environmental health/education committee within the task force as a tool to promote sustainable practices in the community.

Eglantina Canales suggested pushing forward projects within the task force that have not had any progress since 2013. She stressed the importance of reviewing each of the projects in the Action Plan. She supported the idea of creating an environmental health/education committee.

Canales expressed interest in meeting with Hector Chavez to discuss ideas on how to incorporate green infrastructure concepts to an urban forest project that SEMA is developing. She has contacted BECC officials about organizing another green forum in Coahuila.

Carlos Rincon mentioned that there were some projects from Border 2012 that were carried over into the current Action Plan. He stressed the importance of working with project sponsors to review the progress of each project and determine whether it is completed and document it. The projects that have not had any significant progress can be discussed with state partners during conference calls or at the next task force meeting, to determine whether these projects are priority for the next two years. EPA will be planning conference calls with partners to review the Action Plan and organize a calendar of events for the next meetings.

Rincon mentioned that EPA is working on a first draft of the new Action Plan. He hopes it will be ready by February.

He announced that the National Coordinators meeting next year will be held within Region 6 and that one of the main discussion topics will be renewable energy.

Carlos Flores from Acuña mentioned that the municipio is interested in replicating the household hazardous waste collection program in Nuevo Laredo and is in the process of initiating their vehicle emissions program.

The meeting was adjourned.